DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 099 CS 211 076

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TITLE College Handbooks and Early Practical Grammars: A Question of Genre.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (77th, Los Angeles, CA, November 20-25, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Grammatical Acceptability; Higher Education; *Instructional Materials; Language Research; Linguistics; Textbook Evaluation; *Traditional Grammar; *Traditionalism
IDENTIFIERS Grammarians; Historical Background; Textbook Errors

ABSTRACT

An examination of the history of the practical grammar, of which the college handbook is the modern reflex, reveals why the grammar handbook is so stubbornly resistant to changes in linguistic theory, usage, or ideology. First, codifying English grammar and producing texts for teaching English grammar to school children during the eighteenth century was in the hands of amateurs or schoolmasters, rather than those concerned with linguistic theory. This disjunction between linguistics and school grammars came about because the producers of grammars were rarely trained linguists, and because the usual requirements for authorial originality have been waived for producers of grammars. Thus there has traditionally existed neither the means nor the necessity for external forces to shape the making of grammars. Approaching the pedagogical grammar from this generic perspective reveals some interesting ramifications: (1) the oft-described "conservatism" of the school grammar is more etymological than ideological; (2) as a result of its generic self-referentiality, the modern grammar is a veritable pantry of anachronisms; and (3) even minor modifications within the pedagogical grammar, when they occur at all, are accomplished at a glacial pace. Research that is "informed by awareness of the past"--awareness of the inherent and long-standing constraints of the pedagogical grammar as a genre--should facilitate the production of a more flexible vehicle, one capable of responding to current thinking and serving current needs. (NH)

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College Handbooks and Early Practical Grammars: A Question of Genre

A less pretentious, though undoubtedly less charitable title for this presentation might have been "The Trouble with Handbooks." The Hitchcockian echo is intentional: reading contemporary pedagogical grammars and handbooks in the context of their historical antecedents does give the distinct impression of watching a corpse being trundled about, through time as well as through space. However, my objective here is not to denigrate college handbooks, much less to insult their compilers by frivolous analogies, but rather to explain why the grammar handbook is so immalleable, so stubbornly resistant to changes in linguistic theory, usage, or ideology. The history of the practical grammar, of which the college handbook is the modern reflex, suggests that the inability of grammars to respond to external pressures has little to do with the diligence or ideological proclivities of their producers, and everything to do with the grammar as a genre.

Let me begin with an exemplum. In the not-too distant past, a colleague of mine, a university French professor (let's call her Jeanne D'Eau), frustrated by the difficulties of trying to teach the elements of a foreign language to students whose notion of grammar was hazy at best, set about trying to remedy the situation by producing and publishing an English grammar for students of French. Since English traditional grammar was not her field, Madame D'Eau resorted to the grammar book closest to hand: her daughter's eighth-grade English grammar text, from which she took the relevant rules verbatim. These she amalgamated with the corresponding rules for French grammar, thus initiating a series of texts that has since become highly successful.

I begin with this example because the production history of this

particular grammar recapitulates the production history of school grammars in general, and thus sheds light on some special features of the pedagogical grammar as a genre. I want to address three points here. The first is that although Madame D'Eau is perfectly—enviably—bilingual, she is not in the academic sense a linguist. She is, of course competent to teach the rules for generating well-formed, idiomatic French discourse, and can detect and correct performance errors; but, like many of us who are charged with the teaching of English grammar, she has no special training in linguistics—theoretical, applied or historical— and no familiarity with the literature of those fields. She would certainly not describe herself as a grammarian.

Historically, this has been the case for the majority of those who have produced pedagogical grammars of English for nigh-on three centuries. The divergence between linguistics and pedagogical grammar has its roots in the history of English linguistics. In eighteenth-century England, there developed two distinct fields of grammatical endeavour. One, responding to the influence of seventeenth-century French linguistics, was the field of "universal grammar"—philosophical or speculative grammar—which concerned itself with theoretical issues such as the origins of language in general, language as a semiotic system, the relationship between language and mental operations, and the delineation of linguistic universals. Essentially, eighteenth-century speculative grammar was the precursor of both philosophy of language and theoretical linguistics. The other field of grammatical endeavor was wholly pragmatic, devoted to the codification of English grammar, and to the production of texts for teaching English grammar to school children and to speakers of other languages. These texts were known as "practical grammars." Although occasionally the producer of a practical

grammar was also versed in "universal" grammar, more often than not, school grammars were produced by amateurs or schoolmasters, rather than by those concerned with linguistic theory. Where works on speculative grammar, like those of contemporary linguistics, envisioned an audience of other specialists, and thus addressed themselves to a fairly exclusive discourse community, the school grammar targeted a broad, varied, and usually captive audience. Moreover, because that audience consisted primarily of the untutored, the practical grammar—despite the relative lack of expertise on the part of its compilers—rapidly assumed a kind of built-in authority, a de facto canonicity, as it were. For more than two centuries, linguistics and pedagogical grammar have run on parallel tracks. Interpenetration is rare.

The second point illustrated by my initial exemplum is that even though she copied the rules of English grammar from an already published text, my protagonist cannot be accused of plagiarism, nor can she be indicted for copyright infringement. Legally, her procedure was perfectly acceptable. Under copyright law, grammars are included in the peculiar category of compilations, along with dictionaries, maps, arithmetics, almanacs and encyclopedias (Copinger, chap. 9, Section 2.421). This means that the basic materials, "the individual items contained in compilations" are in the public domain (Lindey 116). "Originality" (i.e. that feature of a published work that qualifies it for copyright protection) consists "solely in the labour and skill which the author has expended in collecting, sifting and arranging information . . . that which is protected is the product of the compiler's individual labour and skill in collation . . ." (Encyc. Brit. 426). Thus "A book may . . . be original, in the sense of the law, although the materials of which is is composed. . . can all be traced out

in former works, provided the author has exercised selection, arrangement and combination, and has thereby produced anything new" (Curtis 177). Quite simply, the basic materials of rule-based grammars are up for grabs; theoretically anyone, no matter how unqualified with respect to professional expertise, can produce a copyrightable grammar text by rearranging or otherwise reconstituting the materials found in existing published grammars.

The final feature addressed by my initial example, and the one most important to defining the grammar as a genre, is the product of the first two: because of the disjunction between linguistics and school grammars, because, therefore, the producers of school grammars are rarely trained linguists, and because the usual requirements for authorial originality have been waived for producers of grammars, there has traditionally existed neither the means nor the necessity for external forces to shape the making of grammars. The school grammar is immune to changes in linguistic theory or in usage, blissfully untouched by research in language-related fields, because the source for grammars is other grammars. In effect, the production of a "new" grammar is actually an act of re-production in its most literal sense; the pedagogical grammar exists in a self-referential closed circle, and is therefore constitutionally unable to respond, except under extreme circumstances, to extra-generic forces. This is intertextuality with a vengeance.

Approaching the pedagogical grammar from a generic perspective has some interesting ramifications. It suggests, for example, that the oft-decried "conservatism" of the school grammar is more etymological than ideological: conservare, another English reflex of which is "conservation", means "to

keep or preserve". As a result of its generic self-referentiality, the modern school grammar is a veritable pantry of anachronisms, stocked with linguistic preserves for future consumption. The powerful preservative property of the school grammar may be illustrated by a trivial but telling example. In his compendius English Grammatical Categories, Ian Michael chose the compound sea-fish (used as an example of the substantival adjective), which first appeared in John Wallis' Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae (1653), as a sort of radioactive tracer to determine "how derivative parts of [the] early grammars could be" (312). What he discovered was that this compound appeared as an example of the substantival adjective in thirty-two grammars through 1799. An additional nineteen grammars within this time span have derivative compounds consisting of sea + X or X + fish. Out of curiosity I made a random check of nineteenth-century grammars, and found instances of sea-fish or its variants in discussions of the adjective through the year 1897. A half-life of at least 244 years is pretty impressive, eloquent testimony to the remarkable extent of self-referentiality in the pedagogical grammar and its consequent power to randomly preserve its contents.

At a less trivial level, the preservative power of the pedagogical grammar has collaborated with what I have called its de facto canonicity to endow rules, some of which have no business being in our grammars at all, with an alarming autonomy. For example, I have not found any contemporary college handbook that does not contain some version of the singular agreement rule with indefinite pronouns. This particular rule, which has never reflected actual usage, was a relative late-comer to the practical grammar, having first appeared in Murray's English Grammar in 1795. A subliminal uneasiness, provoked undoubtedly by the incompatibility of the

rule with usage, governed presentations of this rule throughout the nineteenth century, as grammarians attempted to rationalize the confusing notion of singular plurality engendered by strict application of the singular agreement rule. Current grammars, however, simply present the rule as a "fact" of the English language: explanations are no longer considered necessary. This rule, sanctioned by tradition and hermetically sealed within the generic closed circle of the pedagogical grammar, has become a "given". Those who tamper with it do so at their own risk.

In practical terms, what all this means is that even minor modifications within the pedagogical grammar, when they occur at all, are accomplished at a glacial pace. A case in point is the history of the rule governing subject-verb agreement. Since the earliest grammars of English were designed to introduce grammatical concepts to students of Latin, and since the only available generic models were those of the classical languages, the terminology used to describe English grammar was imported from Latin grammars, even in cases in which application was dubious. Thus, throughout the eighteenth century, the general subject-verb agreement rule reflected its latinate origin: "A Verb must agree with its nominative case, in number and in person" (Murray, p. 88, 1795). Despite the fact that the notion of case is of only limited applicability in English, and despite the fact that agreement in person occurs in only one of six possible positions, the Latin-based phrasing of this rule continued until nearly the twentieth century. Only towards the last two decades of the nineteenth century do we find "nominative" replaced by its current term, "subject". It has taken even longer for "person" to be culled from the standard rule for subject-verb agreement. Indeed, the notion of agreement in person is still occasionally found: the 1974 edition of Erlich and Murphy's Concise Index to

English has a separate entry under "Person" (p. 89); the fourth edition of The Random House Handbook (1984) contains an entry on "person and number" (248). And the concept of case still lingers with reference to our pronoun system: at least four handbooks published within the last seven years, including Harbrace, include discussions of "case" in English.

An even more striking example of the inherent impermeability of the pedagogical grammar and its resistance to change is the history of the "generic" masculine rule. The masculine agreement rule was originally imported from Latin grammars, where it appeared as a rule for agreement between adjective and noun, and was subsumed under the rule of precedence that declared that "The masculine is more worthy than the feminine . . . ." Since, however, the English adjective is uninflected, the rule had no relevance to English syntax, and had to content itself with appearing as a free-floating component of discussions of gender in English until the very end of the eighteenth century, when it was first married to the rule for pronoun agreement with singular indefinite constructions. There it remained, a rule derived from the syntax of another language, divorced from its original application, predicated on what we may hope is an outmoded ideological position, sanctioned by the force of tradition, and preserved in the generic amber of the pedagogical grammar, until only a few years ago. Only under the duress of extreme extra-generic ideological pressure, and then only with the support of the relevant power structure (i.e. the editorial staffs of major publications), was the generic closed circle of the pedagogical grammar breached. It took nearly two hundred years to effect this single change, a change not yet fully encoded by any means—a number of contemporary college handbooks tacitly endorse the old rule by avoiding the issue of gender agreement altogether, while schoolchildren are

still being taught that "he" is the only acceptable pronoun for agreement in indefinite constructions.

In the conclusion to his provocative article on "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" (CE 47.2, 1985), Patrick Hartwell cites Scott and Castner's opinion "that much current research [on grammar] is not informed by an awareness of the past. Put simply, we are constrained to reinvent the wheel. My concern here," Hartwell continues, "has been with a far more serious problem: that too often the wheel we reinvent is square" (127). I want to modify this metaphor still further: with regard to the vehicles with which we teach grammar, the pedagogical grammar or the grammatical handbook, our problem is not that we are reinventing the wheel, but that we are failing to do so. My hope is that once our research is "informed by awareness of the past"—by awareness of the inherent and long-standing constraints of the pedagogical grammar as a genre—we will be able to produce a more flexible vehicle, one capable of responding to current thinking and serving current needs.

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